

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 36 | Number 1

Article 18

Fall 12-1-2013

The Oval Pot

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Recommended Citation

Dolendi, Dodi (2013) "The Oval Pot," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 36: No. 1, Article 18.

Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol36/iss1/18>

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Mommy doesn't love me. Grandpa says the baby in her tummy is giving her the pukes today. That stupid baby makes mommy sad because it got stuck in there when Dan did the tickle thing to her. He didn't stick me in her tummy! Grandpa said a birdy called the flying stork dropped me. I think that birdy got lost but I'm not gonna tattle because the stork would be put in trouble time. I get put in trouble time when I ride my bike too long in dark and street lights pop on. And last time, in trouble time I had to stick my nose in the corner and don't move! Dan spanked me with his long, snappy belt. My tears wouldn't stop making Dan mad so he yelled, "Go get in your bleeping bed, you little bleeping bleep!" I cried *soo* hard it made puke! There was the puke all over my bed but Dan said no getting out. I slept in that sour-stink puke. It smelled like my milk jug when Mommy runs out of pennies to get a new one, and we can't drink it. Even if birdy got lost I would be *soo* sad if he slept in his puke. Mommy pinky-promised me trouble time would stop; she's a big fat liar and now I don't get no stupid seven party. No one wants a bad girl like me.

The Oval Pot

[Dodi Dolendi]

The water pipes, in the house we rented, froze and broke in January of 1982. During Chicago's Big Freeze, as temperatures dipped to a frigid 26 degrees below zero and wind chills dropped to 80 below, my husband, Larry; our five-month old, Little Larry; and I moved to our new home: my in-laws' apartment on the second floor of the family building. We unloaded only the absolute necessities, as quickly as we could, because the threat of frostbite burned on our hands, feet, and faces. But the smile on Aunty Mary's face as we walked in the door and the aroma of whatever was simmering in her ever-present oval pot, warmed my heart. We were home.

She scooped Little Larry from my arms and shoed us on to take our things upstairs and hurry back down for dinner. No one ever refused a dinner invitation from Aunty Mary; it wasn't allowed. Refusal equaled insult and her food equaled delicious. Therefore, her kitchen was always filled with family, friends, great food, and fun. I marveled at her ease in the kitchen—both with cooking and feeding the masses. In my mind, Aunty Mary was the Patron Saint of the Kitchen.

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Every day when Little Larry went down for a nap, she'd have me come downstairs. She'd drink coffee and smoke as our conversations swirled for hours; we'd talk about everything and nothing while she prepared dinner. I would offer to help or to make something but she'd have none of that. She just enjoyed the company, she'd say. I enjoyed hers too. I also loved watching her hands as she gently peeled and so finely chopped garlic, as she rolled out dough, or as she tore the romaine for salad. She was an artist. She even handled her oval-shaped silver pot as though it were a precious jewel; I often wondered if that pot held something magical—a mysterious cooking power all its own. I secretly coveted that pot. I even bought a similar one at a garage sale, but quickly discovered it wasn't the same.

Her pot is an empty vessel now—old, stained, worn. In its prime, it was filled with all her Italian specialties: Manaste—boiled greens, beans, and potatoes; Meat Gravy—classic red sauce for pasta; Minesrtone—vegetable soup; or my favorite, Marinara—meatless red sauce. Everyone agreed that Aunt Mary's Marinara (“ma-dee-nod,” as she pronounced it) was “the best.” No one really knew her recipe or her one “secret” ingredient; she never wrote it down. But I know. She showed me one day in her kitchen. The following week she let me make the Marinara. She patiently guided my hands, my knife, my measurements. That day, as I poured the ingredients into her pot, I got a taste of her passion for cooking.

We didn't tell anyone that I cooked that night. We wanted to see if anyone would know. We smiled as everyone ate and agreed that Aunt Mary's Marinara was “the best” and made a pact to take our little secret to the grave.

I cried when I inherited the oval pot. I hugged it tight. The pot had seen better days, but the memories held inside remain fresh, rich, delicious, and abundant. Aunt Mary left me far more than her pot and recipe for “the best” Marinara. She passed on “the best” of herself too. For me, and I suspect all who entered her kitchen, she modeled patience and kindness, comfort and compassion, generosity and warmth along with really great food. I can only hope to put her pot to such good use and share the best recipe of all: her recipe for love.